

A Roof Over Their Head: The Accommodation Needs of Women Workers in Free Trade Zones (FTZs) in Sri Lanka

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Initially known as an Export Processing Zone (EPZ), Sri Lanka's first-ever Free Trade Zone (FTZ) was founded in Katunayake in 1978, following the introduction of an open economy policy that deviated from the country's agro-based economy. The then-J. R. Jayewardene administration offered numerous concessions and incentives for foreign investors which subsequently led to the establishment of FTZs in other areas like Biyagama, Koggala, Mirigama, Malwatte and Wathupitiwala. Since its inception, an overwhelming majority of the enterprises that operate in the FTZs are apparel exporters whilst there is evidence of a rising trend in diversification into other sectors such as glove and jewellery production.

The FTZ workforce is predominantly made up of women who have migrated to large cities for employment. Most possess minimum educational/professional qualifications and are interested in accomplishing short-term personal goals such as saving money for a dowry, building a house and rendering financial assistance to siblings and other family members. The end of the civil war between the government forces and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) in 2009 resulted in the exponential growth of Northern and Eastern Tamil women joining the FTZ labour force. A great number of companies provide not only meals but also shuttle transportation facilities to employees at concessionary rates. Nevertheless, the cramped hostels which have mushroomed in the surrounding areas speak volumes about the deplorable living conditions of the FTZ workforce.



A boarding house located in Katunayake

Access to decent and affordable accommodation is acknowledged a basic human right. The accommodation needs of female FTZ workers, however, are largely ignored both by companies and the Board of Investment (BOI), the apex government body that oversees the FTZs. Arguably, women are more vulnerable to sexual harassment and assault at privately-owned makeshift boarding houses which offer limited privacy. On the other hand, there have been cases of women falling sick owing to poor sanitation facilities in these so-called hostels which are run by a "boarding aunty" (a female overseer who is employed by a landlord). In order to reduce their monthly electricity bill, some opt to cook on

kerosene stoves, posing a risk to health. Sadly, female workers continue to live in small spaces due to their inability to pay exorbitant monthly rents. In other words, their resilience at work is fanned by the commonly-held belief that they would return to their native places once their goals have been attained.

Ironically, the female FTZ labour force is often labelled as *juki keli* (a derogatory name for garment workers) in spite of their massive contribution to the economy. In 2003, six songs that celebrated

female garment-factory workers were released for public consumption by the Joint Apparel Association Forum (JAAF) with a view to empower the unsung heroes of the FTZ workforce. The social stigma against the female workers partly stems from unsatisfactory working conditions at the garment factories. The vast majority of employers reportedly pressurize employees to achieve unrealistic “targets” (weekly production output), capitalizing on the relatively submissive women workers.



A janitor of a garment factory in her room

The Ministry of Women and Child Affairs has a bigger role to play in creating a better workplace experience for women at every level. Unarguably, providing affordable and quality accommodation options will be a step towards improving employee satisfaction. Overlooking the rights of low-qualified FTZ female workers exacerbates the glass ceiling issue which has yet to be addressed both locally and internationally.

One month into office, Sri Lanka’s President Gotabaya Rajapaksa has repeatedly pledged to ensure economic growth and safeguard national security. Against this backdrop, the government is likely to focus on wider economic and social issues in lieu of giving prominence to issues relating to working women. Setting up garment factories in rural areas of the country alone cannot attract and retain women in the workforce. Unless policy makers identify the factors affecting female labour force participation, Sri Lanka’s aim of becoming a hub of ethical fashion will possibly remain a pipedream.